



CROW WING COUNTY MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

## Ask the Master Gardener

MARCH 2015 COLUMN

Dear Master Gardener,

**I'm getting antsy to start some vegetables. I know that most vegetables do best when their seeds are planted directly into the garden, but aren't there some that can be started earlier under lights? What is the process for doing so?**

You are correct that most vegetables should be planted directly into the garden, but some can, and perhaps should, be started earlier because they need longer to mature or do best in cool spring soils. Among those vegetables most amenable to starting indoors are broccoli, cauliflower, early cabbage, peppers and tomatoes. All should be planted in mid-March except tomatoes, which should be planted in early April.

To begin, assemble your equipment: planting trays, seeds, sterile potting soil, adjustable shop lights, and a light timer. Moisten but do not saturate enough of your potting soil to fill the cells of the planting trays. With your finger or a pencil end, make a small depression in each cell. Place 2-3 seeds in each depression and cover with about ¼ inch of dry soil. When the tray is full, mist the surface and cover the tray with the rigid plastic dome that came with the tray or cover the top surface tightly with plastic wrap. Lower the shop light to about 3 inches above the trays and set the timer to provide 14-16 hours of light each day. Check the trays every day to keep them just barely moist.

The seeds will germinate in 1-2 weeks, at which time the plastic should be removed. Not all seeds will germinate, and those that do may do so at differing rates. As they get taller, snip off the weakest seedlings until each cell contains only one plant. Raise the lights as the seedlings grow, keeping them consistently three inches above the tops of the plants. The trickiest part thereafter is watering enough but not too much. "Damping off", in which a seedling will keel over, its thin stem collapsed and blackened, results from too much moisture. If the seedlings become too large for their cells, transplant them into larger containers.

When the last frost date arrives, begin the process called "hardening off", the transition from the warm, protected conditions indoors to harsher, more challenging conditions outdoors. Place the tray(s) outside in a spot sheltered from the sun and critters during the day. Over about a week gradually increase the time in the sun until full days are spent there. Then the

seedlings can be transplanted into the ground, and before you know it, you will be eating tasty fresh vegetables.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**My wife and I were shopping for cabinetry and doors for our remodeling project and noticed that knotty alder is a very attractive and popular wood right now for cabinets and doors. Do alder trees grow in Minnesota?**

Alder trees are in the birch family Betulaceae, and the genus *Alnus*. Alders tend to grow in wet, slightly acidic soils especially along the edges of wetlands. The speckled alder grows in Minnesota and has gray bark that is interrupted with pale warty lenticels.

Alders form a symbiotic relationship with a nitrogen fixing fungus in their roots and convert nitrogen from the air to a usable form in the soils. This not only allows the tree to grow well in very poor soils, but also makes nitrogen available to other plants growing nearby. Just like adding legumes can improve the life of our gardens, alders perform the same function in the forest, often benefiting the trees, shrubs and understory plants around them. Because they have aggressive growth potential and improve soils, they are useful for land reclamation after disturbances. The alder can actually be beautiful and functional and can be trained to a tree-like form by removing lower branches.

The alder that is most commonly used in woodworking is the red alder, which is a North American hardwood typically found in the Pacific Northwest. It can range from rustic with heartwood, streaks, pin holes and open knots to clear and unmarked. It is a softer wood than maple or cherry, has consistent color, stability and accepts stains and finishes very well, so it has proved to be an excellent species for furniture and cabinetry.

**Dear Master Gardener:**

**I've heard that Blue False Indigo is a deer and rabbit resistant plant. Does it grow in this area?**

Baptisia, false indigo, is an easy to grow, low-maintenance, long-lived perennial that is hardy to zone 3. At maturity a Baptisia gets about 3-4 feet in height with a spread of 3-4 feet, but it can take three years to become an established, flowering plant. They develop an extensive, deep root system and should not be disturbed once established. Baptisia are members of the legume, or pea family and have the capability of fixing nitrogen in the soil. Plant them in deep, rich soil that drains well and add lots of organic material to the soil.

A Baptisia blooms for several weeks in May to June and grows best in full sun, but can tolerate part shade. Their black seedpods are valued additions to dried flower arrangements. These plants have no serious insect or disease problems. They are a non-preferred plant for rabbits and deer and attract butterflies.

*Baptisia australis*, blue false indigo, forms a mound of bluish green foliage and blooms with spikes of one-inch blue flowers, maturing to 48 inches. There is also a dwarf variety, *Baptisia australis* var. *minor*, that matures to half the size at 24 inches. 'Purple Smoke' has gray-green stems with purple blue flowers that look gorgeous at peak bloom. 'Carolina Moonlight' has spires of soft, butter yellow pea-like blooms with blue-green foliage. Baptisia can act as a shrub, or make an excellent addition to a perennial border, cottage garden or native plant garden.

## **MARCH GARDEN TIPS**

- Finish pruning oaks this month. Pruning them in April through June will attract sap-loving beetles carrying spores that cause oak wilt.
- Cut pussy willow and forsythia shoots and put them in water for an early taste of spring.
- Often March snowfalls are heavy and wet, bending evergreen branches. Resist the urge to shake the snow off and let Mother Nature do it. Even seemingly gentle shaking can break branches.
- March is the ideal time to prune apple trees. Thin the center for good air and light penetration. Remove all water sprouts (shoots growing straight up). For large trees hire a trained arborist.
- Check chokecherries for black knot cankers. Prune them out, cutting back to healthy wood.
- Resume fertilizing houseplants, using fertilizer at half strength while plants are actively growing. Repot crowded plants in pots just one size larger.
- If you have overwintered any bulbs such as cannas, dahlias, and begonias, check them over, discarding any that are rotted or desiccated.
- Repot stored geraniums and begonias this month in order to have blooms before midsummer. Use good, fresh soil and water them regularly to initiate new growth. Give them plenty of sun.

## QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

Crow Wing County Master Gardeners are trained and certified volunteers for the University of Minnesota Extension. All information given in this column is based on research and information provided by the University. To ask a question, call the Master Gardener Help Line at 218-824-1000, extension 4040 and leave a message. A Master Gardener will return your call.

UMN Extension Crow Wing County Master Gardeners' Website

<http://crowwingmastergardeners.org/>



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